

Secrets of Hard Cider
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For a long time, the essential item for opening that bottle of wine has been a corkscrew. If you're lucky, you may have grabbed one of the twist-cap bottles that are becoming more popular with vineyards. Or you could avoid it all by getting a bottle of champagne and using your bare hands. But if you pick up a bottle and pull off the colorful tinfoil, don't be surprised if you need a classic bottle opener to pop the top.

Bellwether Hard Cider in Trumansburg makes eight varieties of hard cider, all bottled in thick glass like champagne and sealed with a beer bottle type cap. Hard cider is a fermented apple beverage similar to wine and often compared to beer. Bill Barton, owner of Bellwether, said the process of making hard cider is similar to that of making a grape-based wine, but with a few differences.

The apples are fermented by cultured yeast just as beer and wine are. Barton said the important part is making sure the yeast has the characteristics the winemaker wants in the cider.

“The heavy lifting is done by the yeast,” he said. “Our job is to manage that.”

Cider generally has a lower alcohol content than wine because apples are lower in sugar than grapes. Legally, hard cider is limited to between 3 percent and 7 percent alcohol content. Bellwether's ciders tend to range from 3.2 percent to the upper limit.

“That's in the natural range in the apples grown around here,” Barton said.

Barbara Abrams, who interacts with customers in the tasting room, said all of Bellwether's apples are grown locally, mostly on the premises or at Cornell University. English and French cider apples, Liberty apples, Northern Spies, Tompkins King (named

for Tompkins County) and Baldwin apples from Massachusetts are featured in Bellwether's current blends.

"We grow the English and French cider apples in our orchards," Abrams said.

Bellwether's ciders are generally made with more than one type of apple. At the moment they have five types of cider available, ranging from extremely dry to semi-sweet. All of them are made in limited quantities and include at least two types of apple.

"With apples, more so than with grape wines, blending is more important," Barton said.

Abrams said apples used for cider are generally harder than apples people eat. She equated the process to baking an apple pie and said harder apples are used because "you don't want applesauce." She paints a good picture for those who still don't understand the difference.

"I always ask people, 'would you rather get hit in the head with a French cider apple or a golden delicious,'" she said.

Barton said there are several questions involved with making a cider. Should it be sweet or dry? Have bubbles or not? Of Bellwether's five hard ciders available today, two are still and the rest are carbonated, or sparkling. Barton said people tend to be more familiar with sparkling hard ciders and the majority of Bellwether's eight or nine overall blends are sparkling.

Carbonated hard cider is the result of an accident in England in the 1500s, Barton said. A man was playing with the newly developed stronger glass bottles and discovered that the new glass had the strength to hold up against a second fermentation. Cider would

be fermented once to make it alcoholic, then a second fermentation would be started and the liquid would immediately be bottled, creating bubbles.

“It turns out that ciders were probably the first things that were carbonated,” Barton said.

This bottle-carbonation method is known today as the champagne method after process crossed the English Channel into the hands of French champagne makers. However, unlike champagne, hard cider makers let the sediment settle at the bottom of the bottle.

Bellwether does use the champagne method, but more often creates its cider through tank carbonation, where a carbonation stone is added to the fermented mixture before bottling takes place. Barton said the tanks are like “big kegs.”

Bellwether is the only cider producer on the Cayuga Wine Trail. Barton said this sometimes attracts people, but other times wine tours skip over the location.

“Because we’re cider some people may not stop and some people may stop,” he said.

Abrams said the ciders are also excellent for cooking. She recommends slow cooking a pot roast with cider because it cooks better than wine.

“[The ciders] are great in the crock pot,” she said.

Another of Abram’s favorites is combining Bellwether’s Cherry Street cider with barbecue sauce and molasses over pork in the crock pot. When she went to get leftovers a few days later it was all gone.

Barton said traffic to Bellwether’s Route 89 location, which opened in 2003, is steady during most of the summer because people are on vacation. During the autumn,

though, Bellwether is busier on weekends. People especially start seeking out cider when the weather turns colder.

“There’s no doubt that October is the big month,” Barton said.

Since hard cider isn’t as popular in the United States as in other countries, people’s taste for cider tends to vary. To please different palates, Bellwether creates some very nuanced ciders. Spyglass, a still cider, is made with Northern Spy and Liberty apples. Liberty Spy, Spyglass’ sparkling counterpart, features the same apples but in reversed proportion. The taste is similar but the reversed flavors are definitely noticeable. Bellwether’s Cherry Street starts with an apple taste but ends on the back of the tongue with a pleasantly tart cherry flavor. In the end, though, it comes down to bubbles or no bubbles.

“Some days no one likes [sparkling], other days everyone loves it,” Abrams said.